

TOOL 3.8

Guide for Integrating Women into COVID-19 Interventions and Other Emergency Planning and Response

- » **GOAL:** Ensure the integration of gender into COVID-19 interventions so that planning and response are adapted to the specific needs of men and women. Can also be applied to other emergency situations.
- » **TARGET UNIT:** Community Engagement and/or Independent Gender Expert

The outbreak of COVID-19, with its speed, its differences in impact across contexts, and the lack of documented good practice for a pandemic at its scale quickly revealed the response limits of national and international institutions as well as companies. A gender-inclusive response and recovery process proved difficult to achieve. Infrastructure companies can play an important role in supporting communities in pandemic response. Doing so will not only help to maintain social license but can also build increased trust and collaboration between companies and the communities in which they operate. Given the uncertainty about how long crises will last, employers may consider adjusting their budgets, policies, and strategic initiatives to adopt new and effective means and norms for working during and following the crisis.

The guide below is divided into different sections. Companies can choose from these sections to select focus areas that they see as a priority. The suggested actions are just a general roadmap. Based on context, there may be various reasons why certain elements do not fit or are not feasible for a company in each context. We do suggest, however, that each element is carefully considered for its potential benefit and impact.

Retaining Female Staff and Getting them Involved in Decision-Making

Women are often on the front lines of crises at many levels—yet are missing from decision-making tables.²⁵ To integrate gender:

- Consult with women workers and their representatives. Women may have good ideas about how to support employment during difficult times.
- Actively champion women's leadership in emergency response coordination bodies and promote women's meaningful participation.
- Ensure all funding proposals, impact assessments, and strategies are co-created and co-led by women and contain comprehensive gender analyses.

²⁵ Care International, "[Where are the Women? The Conspicuous Absence of Women in COVID-19 Response Teams and Plans, and Why We Need Them](#)", June 2020. OECD, "[Women at the core of the fight against COVID-19 crisis](#)", April 2020.

- Ensure that there are considerations for female members of response teams to facilitate work-life balance, that there is regular paid time off, that appropriate protective materials and equipment as well as psychosocial support is offered.

Ensuring Gender-Responsive Communication

Women, girls, and other underserved populations have less access to information in many contexts for a multitude of reasons, including high rates of female illiteracy, lack of ownership or access to radios, televisions, or mobile phones, and often less interaction outside the home. This can hinder reception of critical information related to disease transmission and prevention, available services, volunteering opportunities, and other elements. To integrate gender:

- Consult women, girls, and other underserved populations in the development of materials and campaigns to support their rollout.
- Adapt messaging and information on diseases or other emergencies to the specific needs of women, but also choose appropriate channels. This can include:
 - SMS/text messages, informational mailers, radio messages, and/or announcements on the company site
 - Mechanisms including but not limited to committees, women's groups and informal networks, adolescent youth and women with disabilities groups, etc.
 - GBVH response services (such as hotline numbers), if they exist
- Proactively address rumors, misinformation, and disease-related superstitions and stigma
- Offer communication services available remotely via different communication channels, including hotlines, text messaging, mobile phone apps, and social media (for example, strengthen apps and mobile technology to offer services to women survivors of violence during quarantine).

Encouraging Healthy and Respectful Workplaces

It is critical that companies take GBVH into account in efforts to respond to emergencies.²⁶ Measures to control the spread of COVID-19 led to increases in domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and abuse. This applies to both the domestic sphere and to the work environment. To this is added the stress and strain on mental and physical health caused by the pandemic, where women in particular have to juggle multiple responsibilities with little mobility or downtime. What companies can do:

- Take the risk of harassment and bullying seriously. For in-depth guidance, consult IFC's detailed [recommendations on workplace risks and responses](#).

²⁶ UN Women, "Facts and Figures: Ending violence against women," 2022.

- Review, strengthen, and revise any strategies, action plans, or policies related to prevention of GBVH to evaluate whether they respond to the changed situation during the emergency and adapt them as needed.
- Integrate service delivery across various spheres (for staff as well as for community members), including mental and physical health, housing, income support, and access to legal and justice resources.
- Support employees' mental health through a variety of tools, such as access to telemedicine, digitally delivered self-diagnostics, psychological therapy, guided meditation, and the creation of virtual support groups.
- Create employee resource groups to reduce the stigma of mental health problems by promoting social contact, peer support, and education about mental illnesses, such as depression and anxiety.

Securing Livelihoods for Women

As the International Labour Organization assessed, women were the most affected by cuts in incomes as an impact of the pandemic.²⁷ During the COVID-19 pandemic as in other emergencies, women experienced a significant burden on their time. Confinement measures led to multiple care responsibilities, reductions in working time, and even permanent exit from the labor market. Also, as women are more likely to work in informal employment and small and medium enterprises (SMEs), COVID restrictions made it very difficult for them to maintain their livelihoods. What companies can do to secure livelihoods for women (partly adapted from OECD²⁸ as well as from the comprehensive case study overview on gender equality and COVID-19 provided by IFC²⁹):

Within the company:

- Offer public childcare options to working parents in essential services, such as healthcare, public utilities, and emergency services.
- Reduce working hours, provide relief for workers, and manage redundancy payments related to temporary layoffs and sickness.
- Promote flexible working arrangements that account for workers' family responsibilities.
- Target men in campaigns to share the burden of informal and unpaid work, especially caring for children, the elderly, and the infirm.

²⁷ ILO, [The COVID-19 response: Getting gender equality right for a better future for women at work](#), 2020.

²⁸ Policy options proposed by OECD, ["Women at the core of the fight against COVID-19 crisis,"](#) April 2020.

²⁹ IFC, [COVID-19 and Gender Equality: Six Actions for the Private Sector](#), November 2020.

- Extend access to unemployment benefits to non-standard workers and/or consider one-off payments to affected workers.

With women-led small and medium enterprises (WSMEs):

- Introduce mediation measures concerning procurement and payment delays.
- Minimize exposure to shocks by diversifying the supplier base and expanding opportunities for women-owned businesses.
- Preserve supplier networks by providing WSMEs with much-needed liquidity. In a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, companies rightfully focused on cash management; nevertheless, this must be balanced with preserving the supplier networks that they rely upon. Through roundtable discussions and interviews, IFC found that companies provided accelerated payments or cash flow relief to give their key vendors a lifeline.
- Promote supplier development programs. Companies can cultivate a resilient supplier network through supplier development—a business strategy that involves working with diverse suppliers to boost their performance and drive continued business growth. These programs provide education and mentoring, facilitate collaboration between suppliers and identify promising suppliers that meet both current and future procurement needs.
- Consider more forward-looking support measures to strengthen business resilience, such as training or mentoring programs to help WSMEs assess and manage the financial impact of the crisis, go digital, or find new markets.

Setting Up Support Services for Staff on Site and/or Communities

Cooperation with multilateral organizations who already have gathered experience with disaster management can be helpful in order to deliver strong and flexible mechanisms for emergency response by benefiting from their expertise and resources. For example, the [“Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, Quality” \(AAAQ\) framework](#) contains questions to identify barriers women and girls may face accessing support services.

In addition, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies developed a good practice checklist for gender and diversity in relief efforts, which has been adapted for this toolkit (see Box 3B).

BOX 3B | Good Practice Checklist for Gender and Diversity in Providing Support Services³⁰

- Collect data on the age, gender, and diversity of the affected staff or community members.
- Ensure that needs assessment and any support teams are balanced for gender and diversity.
- Consult with and seek feedback from both men and women to ensure that services actually meet their respective needs and are socially and culturally appropriate.
- Provide both male and female support personnel.
- Ensure that assistance includes items and information that meets both men's and women's reproductive health needs, including protection against HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.
- Include counseling on domestic violence and alcohol abuse prevention when providing psychosocial support. Ensure this support is sensitive to the needs of some men for help coping with changes in their gender roles, i.e., caring for young children after loss of a spouse.
- Design emergency support services that are responsive to the sociocultural and economic needs and preferences identified by both affected men and women, and keep in mind privacy and safety considerations.
- Identify the possible need to protect vulnerable men and women, including those from ethnic minorities or who are older or disabled. Rigorously monitor, report on, and advocate for the safety of these groups.

³⁰ From: "[International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. A practical guide to Gender-sensitive Approaches for Disaster Management.](#)" IRC: Geneva, 2010.